

Seattle Municipal Court

INTRODUCTION

This topic paper provides an overview of the Seattle Municipal Court and describes the court's purpose and role in City government, the organizational structure and a description of the specialty court programs offered to defendants.

BACKGROUND

Located along 5th Avenue between James Street and Cherry Street in downtown Seattle, Seattle Municipal Court is a limited jurisdiction court authorized under state law¹ to adjudicate all violations of the Seattle Municipal Code. Funding for Seattle Municipal Court operations and administration comes principally from the General Fund with a department budget of about \$30 million and 214 employees (2016 adopted budget).

Seattle Municipal Court is a misdemeanor court responsible for adjudicating misdemeanor crimes, gross misdemeanors, infractions and violations of the Seattle Municipal Code. Below is a summary of the violations processed by the court.

- Misdemeanors—crimes with a maximum of 90 days in jail and up to \$1,000 in fines
- Gross misdemeanors—crimes with a maximum of 1 year in jail and up to \$5,000 in fines
- Infractions (parking, traffic, etc.) – typically, includes acts which are prohibited by law, but not legally defined as a crime
- Civil violations—heard by the Court when the City of Seattle seeks enforcement of their fire, housing or building codes

Seattle's felony cases are processed by the King County Superior Court located on 3rd Avenue and James Street in downtown Seattle. King County Superior Court presides over felony violations as well as domestic disputes, civil cases and other violations. The following list describes the type of cases processed by King County Superior Court.

- Civil matters involving unlawful detainers and injunctions
- Felony criminal cases
- Misdemeanor criminal cases not otherwise provided for by the Seattle Municipal Code
- Family law, including dissolutions, child support, adoptions, parentage and felony domestic-violence protection matters
- Probate and guardianship matters
- Juvenile offender matters
- Juvenile dependencies, including abused and neglected children, children in need of services, at-risk youth and truancies
- Mental illness and involuntary commitment matters

¹ See [Revised Code of Washington 3.50.020](#)

In addition to adjudicating misdemeanor cases, Seattle Municipal Court processes the City's traffic and parking infraction fines, forfeitures and parking meter fees. In 2014, fees, fines and forfeitures amounted to \$66 million or about six percent of all General Fund revenue.

GOVERNANCE, CRIMINAL JUSTICE CONTRACTS AND FINANCES

Seattle Municipal Court is a branch of government separate and apart from the Legislative Department and Executive. Seven elected judges serving four-year terms provide administrative oversight, set court policies and approve procedures in the same manner as a board of directors. Judgeship positions are non-partisan and candidates must meet the criteria set forth in state law and the Seattle Municipal Code². A presiding judge³, elected by their peers, acts as the court's chief executive for a two-year term and sets business priorities and goals during their tenure.

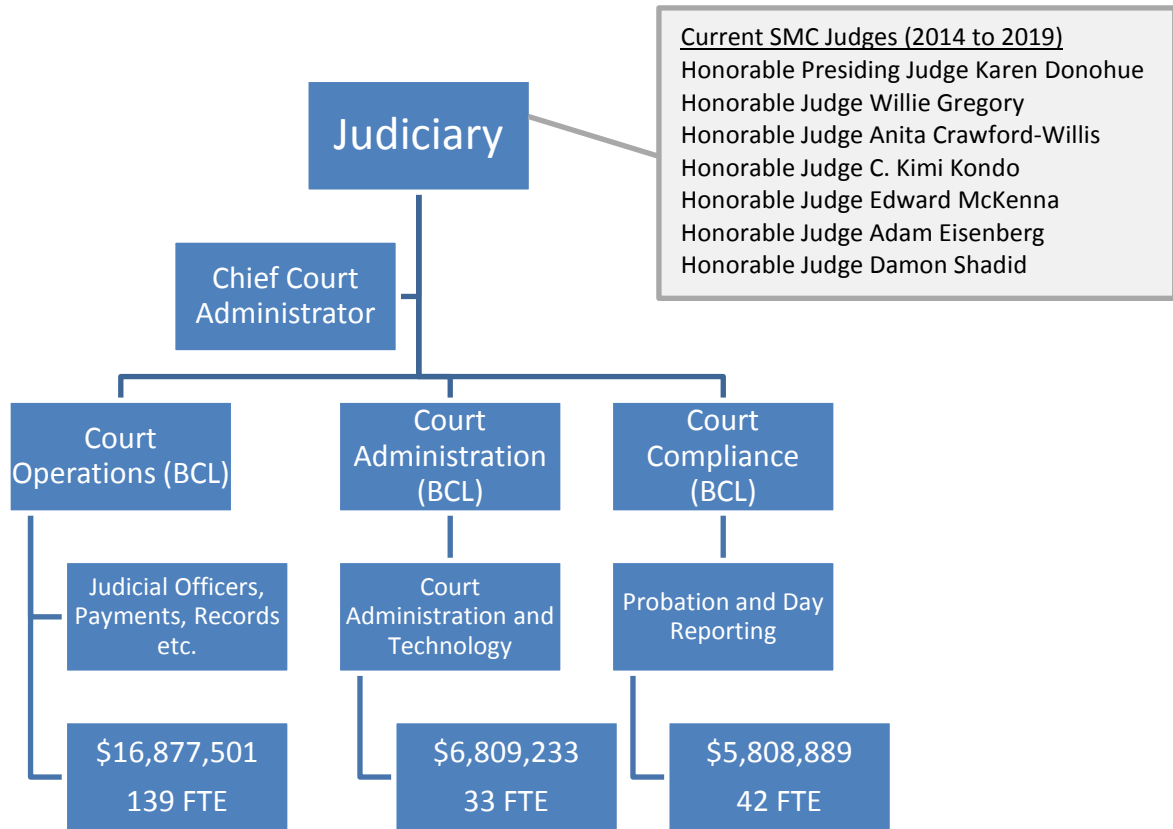
Seattle Municipal Court is functionally organized around three operating divisions each corresponding to a budget change level (BCL): (1) Court Operations, (2) Court Administration and (3) Court Compliance.

² See [Seattle Municipal Code 3.33.110](#)

³ Washington State Courts [General Rule 29](#) is the guiding state policy defining the role of presiding judges.

Chart 1 provides an illustration of the Court’s organizational structure, its three operating divisions and describes the anticipated 2016 expenditures and FTEs⁴ by BCL.

Chart 1: Seattle Municipal Court Organization



The chief court administrator reports to the presiding judge and is responsible for day-to-day court operations, administration, policy development, program development and compliance related activities. The chief court administrator is subject to confirmation by a majority of the City Council, and likewise subject to removal by the judges of the Municipal Court when confirmed by the City Council.

In addition to the seven elected judges, the Court employs six magistrates to adjudicate minor, non-criminal infractions such as parking tickets or moving violations.

Criminal Justice Contracts

The City provides prosecution, public defense and jail services using either City resources or contract agreements. The City’s Law Department is responsible for prosecuting criminal acts and non-criminal violations of the Seattle Municipal Code whereas public defense services are provisioned by contract with King County’s Department of Public Defense (KCDPD). Qualifying defendants can choose one of three KCDPD divisions for legal assistance in either criminal or

⁴ Proposed expenditures and FTEs are based on the Council’s 2016 Adopted Budget.

civil cases. The City contracts with King County, Snohomish County and other jurisdictions for the provision of jail services. The Council’s 2016 adopted budget identifies \$24 million of spending for criminal justice contracted services (\$7 million for public defense and \$17 million for jail services⁵). Public defense and jail services are supported by the City’s General Fund.

As mentioned earlier, funding for Seattle Municipal Court’s operations comes principally from the City’s General Fund. The Court submits an annual budget proposal to the Council as part of the Mayor’s proposed budget in September of each year. Similar to the city’s executive departments, the Council can change or condition the Court’s budget. The majority of Court spending—about \$17 million or 56% of appropriations in the 2016 adopted budget—goes toward Court Operations for the purpose of processing defendants in the courtroom or magistrate’s office. Appropriations related to court administration represent about \$7 million or 25 percent of all spending with the balance of the Court’s budget appropriated for compliance-related activities. Table 1 provides a summary review of spending over the past three years across all three functional areas.

Table 1: Seattle Municipal Court Three-Year Expenditures

	<u>2014 Actuals</u>	<u>2015 Adopted</u>	<u>2016 Proposed</u>
Court Administration	\$6,644,157	\$6,770,120	\$7,447,922
Court Compliance	\$5,765,112	\$5,775,522	\$5,904,301
Court Operations	\$16,748,902	\$16,780,555	\$16,981,764
Department Total	\$29,158,171	\$29,326,197	\$30,333,987

Specialty Courts

Seattle Municipal Court operates four specialty courts designed to address the specific needs of defendants and the underlying cause(s) of their criminal behavior. The specialty courts aim is to help protect the community at large, minimize costs for incarceration, and re-arrests. This next section provides a brief overview of each specialty court.

Mental Health Court

The purpose of the Mental Health Court is to reduce jail use and decrease interactions of mentally ill persons with the criminal justice system. The court seeks to connect participants to mental health service, improve access to housing and provide linkages with community agencies to enhance the quality of life for defendants as they stabilize their life through treatment. More information on the Mental Health Court can be found [here](#).

Domestic Violence Court

The purpose of the Domestic Violence Court is to improve the safety of domestic violence victims, hold domestic violence perpetrators more consistently accountable and increase effective management of domestic violence cases. Victim safety is a primary concern for these

⁵ City of Seattle’s 2016 proposed budget – p.265

cases and special emphasis is placed on accountability for offender actions. More information on Domestic Violence Court can be found [here](#).

Community Court

The Community Court holds defendants who repeatedly commit low-level crimes, fail to appear at court hearings, and/or fail to comply with court-ordered sanctions more accountable to both the court and the community. The Community Court enhances accountability through mandated community service assignments. The court provides human service connections for housing, chemical dependency treatment, mental health services, educational opportunities and employment assistance. The Community Court exists to reduce process inefficiencies, improve the well-being of defendants and minimize costs to the court and the City. More information on the Community Court can be found [here](#).

Veterans Treatment Court

Through the combination of structured support provided by the court and health care and other social service resources provided by the Department of Veteran Affairs, the City expects to see a reduction in recidivism and an increase in veterans accessing needed services from the VA and community-based human service providers. More information on the Veterans Treatment Court can be found [here](#).

Judges serving the various specialty courts for 2017:

- Judge C. Kimi Kondo – Domestic Violence Court
- Judge Willie Gregory –Community Court, Veterans Court
- Judge Adam Eisenberg – Domestic Violence Court
- Assistant Presiding Judge Ed McKenna –Mental Health Court